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I. LAND AND PEOPLE

1. Fiji is centrally located in the Pacific Ocean, midway between the equator and the South Pole, and between longitudes 175° west and 175° east and latitudes 15° and 22° south. Although over 100 of Fiji's 330 islands are inhabited, most people live on the two largest islands: Viti Levu, which is 10,430 square kilometres, and Vanua Levu, which is 5,550 square kilometres. The two cities of Fiji - Suva, the capital, and Lautoka - are both located in Viti Levu.

2. Most of the islands are of volcanic origin, with high and rugged terrain. Only 16 per cent of Fiji's land is suitable for agriculture, mostly along the coastal plains, river deltas, and valleys. Fiji's climate is tropical maritime with temperatures averaging 22° Celsius (72° F) in the cooler months (May to October). Tropical cyclones are commonplace in this part of the central Pacific, most often between November and April. On average, 10 to 12 cyclones each decade affect some part of Fiji, two to three of which are severe storms and wreak far-reaching damage.

3. At the end of 1994, the population of Fiji was around 783,550, 1.6 per cent more than in 1993. The growth rate has been dampened by high out-migration in recent years, an outflow predominantly of skilled workers and professionals and their families. This "brain drain" has had many repercussions, particularly on the staffing of schools and medical facilities and, perhaps ironically, on Fiji's unemployment problems, for the loss of skilled experienced workers erodes the basis for economic recovery.

4. The people of Fiji are predominantly rural dwellers; more than 60 per cent of Fiji's people live in rural areas. The urban population is concentrated in Suva (71,000) and Lautoka (28,730), the other six urban centres being very much smaller.

5. Fiji is home to people of many races. Indigenous Fijians, Indians, Europeans, Chinese, other Pacific Islanders, and people of mixed racial descent live in harmony, yet keeping their own cultures and identity. Just over 50 per cent of the population are Fijians, most of whom live in rural villages. Eighty three per cent of the land is classified as Native Land under their ownership. About 45 per cent of Fiji's population are of Indian ethnicity. Most are descendants of indentured labourers brought to Fiji around 100 years ago to work in sugar plantations. Through the years they have continued to work the land, becoming prominent in agriculture and commerce. The other 5 per cent of Fiji's population consists of Chinese, Europeans, other Pacific Islanders, and a fast-growing number of people of mixed descent.

6. Citizenship of Fiji is acquired by birth, descent, naturalization or registration, one of the main provisions of naturalization being that applicants receive the Prime Minister's consent. The Government grants permits to people who wish to enter and reside in Fiji, either as visitors for less than six months, or on work permits. People wishing to invest at least F$ 500,000 in Fiji can apply for special three-year residency permits.

7. Religion is an important facet of life in Fiji. Fifty-three per cent of Fiji's population are Christians. Other main religions are Hindu (38 per cent), Muslim (8 per cent) and Sikhism (0.7 per cent).

8. English is the lingua franca and one of the three official languages of Fiji. The other official languages, Fijian and Hindi, are also widely spoken and taught in schools as part of the curricula.

II. POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SYSTEM

9. Fiji is a sovereign democratic State and has a bicameral parliament consisting of a President, an elected House of Representatives, and a nominated Senate. Together these institutions exercise the legislative functions of government. A former British colony, Fiji gained independence in 1970 and became a republic in 1987 after two coups d'état. After the coups, Fiji was run by an interim government for three years until the first general election was held in May 1992. Another general election followed 20 months later, following the defeat in parliament of the budget bill. An interesting feature of the latest election was the increased involvement of women; 12 stood as candidates, the biggest number ever to contest an election. Three won and one woman is now a Cabinet Minister, holding the portfolio for Health and Social Welfare.

10. The 1990 Constitution emphasizes fundamental rights and freedoms and conforms to all major United Nations instruments relating to representation, land rights, customs, traditions, and cultural inheritance. While the Constitution guarantees special rights of protection and privileges to indigenous Fijians it does not deny the rights and freedoms of other citizens such as the rights to life, liberty, security of the person, expression, assembly and association, and protection for the privacy of the home and other property. Nevertheless, some provisions in the 1990 Constitution have proved to be contentious, such as those that relate to representation of different ethnic communities in parliament. Sections 77 and 161 of the 1990 Constitution require that a review is carried out within seven years of its promulgation. For these reasons, a Constitution Review Commission has been commissioned. The Chairperson is an eminent person from outside Fiji (Sir Paul Reeves, GCMG, GCVO, KBE, QSO, K St. J of New Zealand). The Committee is now hearing submissions from all individuals and organizations that wish to present their views. The Committee will present its report by 30 June 1996. Under its terms of reference, the Committee is asked to "review the Constitution promoting racial harmony and national unity and the economic and social advancement of all communities, bearing in mind internationally recognized principles and standards of individual and group rights".

11. Tourism and sugar are the mainstays of Fiji's economy. The two industries earned the country some $600 million last year and provided employment to over 80,000 people. The Government has made some progress in diversifying the economy into other areas of enterprise. The forestry sector is expanding into plantation production of pulp chips and sawn timber for export, with annual earnings expected to exceed $100 million by the year 2000. Fisheries' production and exports have also grown in the last four years. The manufacturing sector has grown especially rapidly, led by the garment industry, and now includes high-value products such as leather and furniture.

12. The aim of the Government's economic policy is to improve the living standards of its people. Since 1987, the Government has adopted new policies and strategies aimed at accelerating growth mainly through increased exports. The major policies are designed to:

(a) Deregulate the economy to allow world market forces determine prices and production;

(b) Reform the tax system;

(c) Maintain a wages policy that is internationally competitive;

(d) Encourage all sections of the community to participate in economic expansion, but especially increase Fijian participation in commerce and industry; and

(e) Reorient sector policies to reinforce export development.

13. Notwithstanding these efforts, Fiji's real GDP growth has been slow in recent years. In nominal terms, GDP in Fijian dollars rose an average of 5 per cent each year from 1980 to 1988, but in real terms, GDP dropped an average 1 per cent each year. In the wake of the political disturbances of 1987 and the devaluation of the Fiji dollar the same year, the Government's operating expenditure was substantially reduced, including its spending on education and social services. The Government restored operational expenditure levels after 1990, and GDP growth has recovered to some extent in the last two years.

14. Although economic prospects may be improving, employment opportunities are growing more slowly than the potential labour force is expanding. The age structure of Fiji's population is changing in a significant way. Today just over one third (36 per cent) of the Fiji population are children aged less than 15 years, a proportion that is decreasing in size (although absolute numbers will decline only slightly). A growing proportion of the population is in the economically active age-group, aged between 15 and 64 years. Over the next decade, therefore, the demand for school places and other services for children is likely to stabilize while the number of young people seeking jobs will increase quite quickly. As people move out of subsistence production and as more young people pass through secondary school, the number of job-seekers swells. Women constitute the fastest growing group of job-seekers. Every year around 9,000 school leavers enter the labour market of whom only 2,000 are absorbed into paid employment. Some of the remainder are absorbed in tertiary institutions or informal employment but many join the growing pool of unemployed. The problem of unemployment, the growing imbalance in income distribution, and the pressure on Government to provide social services in the face of sluggish economic growth have generated considerable discussion of ways to increase investment and develop new avenues of growth.